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"THE BEST MEANING IS BRIGHT" – FLANNERY O'CONNOR DECONSTRUCTS THE DECONSTRUCTIONISTS ("GOD BLESS THEIR HEARTS!")



By Brandon P. Otto

Talking about the "best and the brightest" when discussing the meaning of a text is often regarded as the most laughable contradiction nowadays. "You are old fashioned, my boy," might the lofty literary theorist say, "for in these times the darkest is seen as the greatest." Indeed, it seems far too often that literary critics think that the only good meaning in a text is the one least present there.

I don't know how long this theory has been present, but it was certainly in vogue in 1961, when Flannery O'Connor commented, "If teachers are in the habit of approaching a story as if it were a research problem for which any answer is believable so long as it is not obvious, then I think students will never learn to enjoy fiction."

If an author says what the main theme of his story is, you can be certain critics will say that he doesn't understand what he has written. After all, as the common deconstructionist phrase goes, "The text subverts itself." That means that even what the text says in plain sight is regarded as a mirage. The view is common now that "any answer is believable so long as it is not obvious." The darkest, most hidden meaning is now the best meaning of a text.

Yet stripping a story even beyond its bones is not what helps one understand it. It often becomes merely an academic dissection with little feeling put in it, and a lack of emotion is not how to understand a story. As O'Connor wrote, "Too much interpretation is certainly worse than too little, and where feeling for a story is absent, theory will not supply it."

When we approach a story, we should not do so from the mindset of finding the secret meanings that even the author did not imply: we have to take the story for what it is. This criticism obsessed with digging down into the text is akin to the caricatures of Freudian psychoanalysis: no matter what the obvious answer is, the *true* issue is, say, maternal.

A Catholic sees that there is meaning beyond just the base level of text, of course: that is not called into question. What *is* the issue is when the truth of the text is replaced by what an overzealous critic considers the truth to be, a truth often alien to the text itself: the once-living story is now a perverse mockery of itself.

Our view of fiction should instead be in line with O'Connor's words: "The meaning of a story should go on expanding for the reader the more he thinks about it, but meaning cannot be captured in an interpretation."

There is a rich multitude of meanings to everything, whether the creation of God or the creation of man. When the two are combined, we have the many senses found in the Sacred Scriptures. When we view just God's creation, we see His manifold grandeur expressed; when we view just man's, we see the hidden treasures of a text.

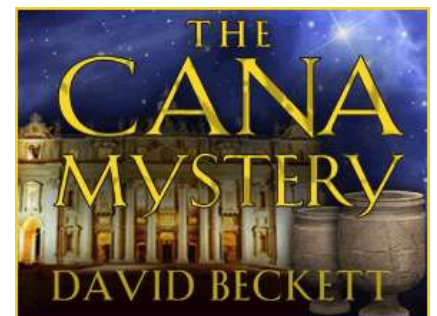
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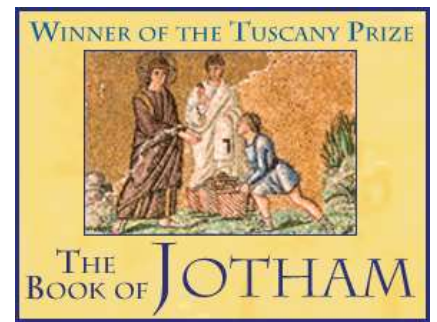
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When we look at stories, then, we should not toss away the surface meaning nor disparage what may lie beneath, but we cannot turn a text into a perverse refutation of itself and declare it interpreted. When we read a text and reflect, it should grow and expand, not contract; it should open up wider horizons, not be compressed into a single alien interpretation.

O'Connor's maxim is true: "Too much interpretation is certainly worse than too little, and where feeling for a story is absent, theory will not supply it."

Let us then cultivate feelings rather than theories, and in this way let us allow the meaning of the story to expand before our eyes, growing brighter and better as we gaze.



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